"Glimmerings, Hints, and Secret Amazements": William Blake, Walt Whitman, and the Spiritual Incantations of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"

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Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” is an indictment of the world. It begins with a momentous claim: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked” (9). Like a witness on the stand, Ginsberg delivers a testimony, elucidating from obscurity those “who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall” (10). He speaks the uncomfortable truth of an America whose white picket-fences mar from view the “yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars” (11).

Ginsberg’s voice in “Howl” is compelled by personal experience, which he converts into a paradigm for “my generation.” Part narrator, part subject, Ginsberg confronts his pain to “recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and stand before you speechless and intelligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head” (20). By expressing his and his friends’ agony in mystifying, difficult, tactile language, Ginsberg takes the perspective of the
“madman bum’s” life, to scrutinize America’s institutional cruelty, which is best made visible by focusing on those “who reappeared on the West Coast investigating the F.B.I. in beards and shorts with big pacifist eyes sexy in their dark skin passing out incomprehensible leaflets” (12).

These people are not just victims, or outsiders to be scorned. For Ginsberg they are prophets and seers of larger truths “who loned it through the streets of Idaho seeking visionary indian angels who were visionary indian angels” (12). Thus “Howl” legitimates the voices of outsiders like Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, Peter Orlovsky, Lucien Carr, and, most notably, Ginsberg himself, as having access to a kind of divine madness that reveals fundamental problems from conventionally ignored viewpoints.

These visions both express the power of and reveal the source of the abuse Ginsberg catalogs as Moloch, which is described in Section II as a devouring God “whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money!” (21). The section unfolds as a series of exclamatory exclamations, filled as much with the victory of revelation as with fury: “Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius!” (22). Ginsberg directly confronts a capitalism whose lifeblood is profit, and which will justify oppression in the name of protecting the tenets of mainstream American life: “Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible mad houses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!” (22).
The Moloch section reveals America as a force that strangles any attempt at expression, melting individuality into a mechanical manifestation of ominous power. In 1959 Ginsberg would expand on his accusations in an essay titled “Poetry, Violence, and the Trembling Lambs or Independence Day Manifesto.” The nation’s oppressive forces extended beyond the military industrial complex to include the police and the media: “newspapers have moved in, mad movie manufacturers from Hollywood are at this moment preparing bestial stereotypes of the scene.” In language that recalls his poem, he claims that, “to be a junky in America is like having been a Jew in Nazi Germany” (Ginsberg 4). In both essay and poem Ginsberg constructs a paradigm in which innocence and expression struggle to survive America’s suffocating norms.

The Moloch section ends, however, with Ginsberg introducing the potential for holiness and wondering at the “Pavement, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us!” (22), finally claiming that “Visions! omens! hallucinations! ecstasies!” (22), have “gone down the American river,” and finally “into the street!” (23). The next section is an ode of solidarity to Carl Solomon, their friendship established in societal exile in the New York Psychiatric institute: “I’m with you in Rockland/ where you scream in a straightjacket that you’re losing the game of the actual pingpong of the abyss.” (25). These lines are poetic proclamations that affirm “hallucinations!” and “ecstasies!” in spite of America’s deployment of the “straightjacket.”

What follows, “Footnote to Howl,” accepts these as “holy.” In so doing, Ginsberg suggests another dimension to the suffering seen in “Howl.” Abjection
and misery are part of a “holy” whole that we do not fully see, one that only comes into view via the mad vision that connects Ginsberg to “Howl’s” disenfranchised. The OED defines the adjective “holy” as “Morally and spiritually excellent.” I want to emphasize this “holy” dimension. Ginsberg’s expansive use of “holy” to frame his experiences in “Howl” implicates the deep spiritual transformations he underwent, largely in the period between 1947 and 1952. These years elucidate Ginsberg’s search for a language to express the redemptive holiness in his suffering.

Certainly, “Footnote to Howl” subsumes the text that it follows, characterizing every one of Ginsberg’s proclamations in the context of its holy vision. Amy Hungerford, for instance, elucidates “Howl’s” spiritual voice in “Footnote’s” terms:

Ginsberg takes on the role of the psalmist, too, in “Howl.” This is especially true in “Footnote to Howl,” where the poet’s sacralizing voice makes all things holy: “Holy! Holy! Holy! . . . The world is Holy! The soul is Holy! The skin is Holy!” and so on.” Most grandly, the speaker describes his own work as divine, and himself as one “who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between visual images and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of conscious-ness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus” (“Howl,” Section I, 74). The poet in these lines is nothing less than Genesis’s YHWH (274).
Other critics have emphasized “Howl’s” spiritual vision, notably James Breslin in his “Essay on ‘Howl’” and Haidee Kruger in “‘Confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought’: a reading of Allen Ginsberg’s Beat poetry.” I would like to extend and deepen this discussion by linking the poem’s spiritual vision, and the language he employs to express it, to a series of experiences between 1947 and 1952. This period includes the crucial moment in “Howl’s” conception, and Ginsberg’s life: his 1948 hallucination of William Blake. It also covers episodes of misery and confusion, sexual debasement and masochism that anticipate “Howl’s” embrace of divine madness. In his writings during this period, we also find two primary inspirations for Ginsberg’s voice in “Howl”: the works of both William Blake and Walt Whitman were each crucial to the poetic emergence of Ginsberg’s spiritual vision. In their works, Ginsberg finds language to express his spirituality, and elucidate a spiritual understanding that is immanent to “Howl” and transfuses all of Howl and Other Poems. In “Footnote to Howl,” we see him evoke Blake in the “lamb of the middleclass” and the “shepherds of rebellion” (11), which, too, are holy. Walt Whitman’s pluralistic and democratic voice is apparent in the “cafeterias filled with millions” (9), and in the list of cities: “New York,” “San Francisco,” “Peoria and Seattle,” “Paris,” “Tangiers,” “Holy Moscow,” “Holy Istanbul” (11). Further, the “Holy!” theme clearly established in “Footnote” implicates the very meaning of Howl. Ginsberg’s “Howl” is “Holy!,” a spiritual cry that permeates his prophetic vision.

“Footnote to Howl” occupies a complex place in Allen Ginsberg’s 1956 Howl and Other Poems. The problem of a footnote is that it is not really a part of
the text, but implies that it explains, or dilates upon the text. It exists both outside and throughout the text it accompanies. It is complete on its own, yet the text it refers to relies on the footnote’s meaning for context. In the case of “Footnote to Howl”, its title delineates itself from “Howl.” Rather than being “Part IV,” Ginsberg consciously chose to present the piece outside the raucous litany that it follows. However, “Footnote’s” title also states its connection to “Howl”. In directly proceeding “Howl,” and ultimately being contained in a collection called “Howl,” “Footnote” is a literary addendum through which “Howl” and the rest of Howl and Other Poems can be read.

The holy “Footnote,” in existing alone as a poem, is not contained to the fiery opening sections. Rather, “Footnote” confers meaning to the rest of the book. “Footnote” sets the terms of Ginsberg’s spirituality in terms that are expounded upon in the rest of Howl. Ultimately, Ginsberg’s spiritual statement in “Footnote” establishes a connection between these moments and eternity; “everyday is in eternity” (3), and posits a voice that depends on understanding this immanence. Herein, Ginsberg realizes the holiness of “time in eternity,” “eternity in time,” and “the clocks of space” (12). Ginsberg’s spiritual worldview develops understanding simultaneous to constriction. Assessing Howl and Other Poems in the context of “Footnote” provides a novel entry point to “Howl’s” interpretation. Where most critics, like Breslin, emphasize Ginsberg’s symbolic struggle with modernity’s castration as represented by Moloch in Part II – (“Ginsberg’s poem reaches, nervously and ardently, after rest from urban frenzy,” (Breslin 1) – seeing “Howl” without “Footnote’s” crucial context
overlooks a big hint. In redeeming “Howl’s” suffering with spiritual significance, “Footnote” gestures at the crucial moment in Ginsberg's life, and the literary muses that provoke Howl and inform Ginsberg’s spiritual voice and radical vision.

In “Triangulating Blake, Whitman, and Ginsberg,” Gary Schmidgall connects these three, holding that the poets “identified the same social and literary foibles in their countrymen, and this produced remarkably similar targets for their fury” (132). I wish to follow Schmidgall’s connections between the three writers, but establish a novel poetic link in how Blake and Whitman allow Ginsberg to find a way to voice spirituality in his poetry. From Blake, Ginsberg developed apparitional vision: an understanding of the immanence of moment and eternity, of a particular place and the whole universe, while Whitman imparted to Ginsberg language with which to write out his sexuality by imposing a queer world on normative American society. Together, they allowed Ginsberg to assimilate his queer sexuality into his spirituality, the explicit embrace of which differentiates him from both of his mentors.

These poetic influences, especially William Blake's, point to events and experiences in Ginsberg's life in this period. Thus, it is important to establish a picture of the Columbia senior in 1947 held stagnant by the premonition that he
may be insane. Investigating these events sheds some light on the impetuses behind Ginsberg's spiritual search.

Ginsberg had begun seriously writing poetry – what he called in his journal his first "real poems – first poems of genius" – in January and February 1945, and had established himself as a brilliant, if not erratic, person on campus by the end of his first full year at Columbia (Schumacher 51). In March 1945, Dean Ralph Furey answered a cleaning woman’s complaint regarding Ginsberg. Ginsberg and the domestic worker had a tense relationship, the former having accused the custodian of anti-Semitism in the past. This complaint, then, shrouded in personal bitterness, provoked Ginsberg to write into the grime on his window, (knowing this cleaning woman would have to wash the window,)

*Fuck the Jews!* and underneath, *Butler has no balls*, a shot at the university’s president, Nicholas Murray Butler. He also drew on the dirty window a skull and crossbones and images of male genitals. Instead of washing the window, the worker filed a formal complaint against Ginsberg’s obscenity. Ginsberg was suspended and forced to vacate Livingston Hall. He did not re-enter Columbia until September 1946, having applied for readmission a few months earlier. During the forced academic hiatus, Ginsberg had lived for a short time on 115th street, in his father’s house in Paterson, and enrolled in the Merchant Marines to gain money for his reentrance and academic fees.

Ginsberg's life in the late 1940’s was deeply unsettled. After getting into Columbia, he was promptly dismissed, forcing him into transience, between apartments, his father's house, the Merchant Marines. This era is also featured in
“Howl,” when Ginsberg recounts himself being “expelled” for “publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull” (9). A good insight into the inner disorder these developments engendered is a letter to the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich in March of 1947. In the letter, Ginsberg describes his current life circumstances and hypothesizes the seeds of his psychological turmoil. Ginsberg had sought therapy for a long time, and he hoped his direct plea to Reich would finally provoke the sort of analysis that would resolve some of his psychic tension. Despite studying writing and poetry at Columbia, “I am,” he wrote to Reich, “much too conscious of writing as a sort of secondary, vicarious emotion to be able to ‘dedicate’ myself to it or any other activity.” Ginsberg continued in the letter: “I lead an extensive and diverse social life,” with friends who are both “bourgeois” and “hip”. Within these relationships, Ginsberg “found myself drifting into intercourse with the periphery of criminal circles in New York,” even writing that he, “used narcotics pretty extensively, but not to the point of addiction to any; and by now I have stopped the use of them completely.” He’d experimented with LSD with a friend group that included Jack Kerouac and Lucien Carr, who was indicted for second-degree murder in 1944. The letter to Reich also demonstrates Ginsberg’s confusion regarding his sexuality. Ginsberg was devastatingly attracted to Carr, but had not pursued much of a stable romantic relationship, nor anyone else. Ginsberg had not yet developed a framework through with he could make sense of the aggression he would express in “Howl.”
Ginsberg pointed out in the letter to Reich, “I have been homosexual for as long as I can remember, and have had a limited number of homosexual affairs, both temporary and protracted. They have been unsatisfactory to me.” The most significant of these relationships, one that is recalled in “Howl” via the moniker “NC,” was with Neal Cassady. In December 1946, Cassady had arrived in New York City from Denver with his sixteen-year-old wife LuAnne. However, despite having reveled in a few intense sexual escapades, Cassady left New York and Ginsberg in early March 1947, leaving the young poet melancholy, but not shocked.

He observed to Reich that his “main psychic difficulty, as far as I know, is the usual oedipal entanglement.” and he expressed having “had long periods of depression, guilt feelings – disguised mostly as a sort of Kafkian sordidness of sense of self – melancholy, the whole gamut I suppose.” Ginsberg is demonstrably unsure and timid; as if every phrase he writes about himself is a guess – surely consequent to the sanity he believes lacking. Reeling from a series of letdowns, and increasingly jaded towards institutions like Columbia, Ginsberg retreated into himself – and became compelled to the spiritual search that would ultimately produce “Howl.” His feelings of “depression” and “guilt” accentuate Allen Ginsberg, the editor of the Columbia Undergraduate Literary Review and President of the Literary Society, who nevertheless could not dedicate himself to writing, before he would become the poet-prophet confident in his vision enough to proclaim in “America,” “I have mystic visions and cosmic vibrations.” (36).
By 1948, Ginsberg’s close friend and writerly inspiration Jack Kerouac was living in Long Island but seemed a world away. William Burroughs was conducting his own mystic explorations in Mexico. His once-lover Neal Cassady was slowly and destructively ending their romantic relationship, having moved west. Ginsberg’s friendships in New York City were not faring much better. He would soon discover his friend Herbert Huncke was stealing from his apartment to feed his heroin habit.

In his comprehensive biography, *Dharma Lion*, Michael Schumacher portrays Ginsberg during this period as withdrawn from the social debates that had once so animated him, and which his poetry would later spark. In high school, and at the beginning of his time at Columbia, he had been the “class philosopher,” who “embraced the theoretical ideal of communism in his belief that democracy was only one stop in the evolution of humanity toward complete self-conscious efforts aimed at the good of mankind” (Morgan 36). However, Ginsberg had become jaded, and his faltering personal relationships offered no consolation. Schumacher points out that, “Rather than concern himself with the anti-Communist rhetoric espoused by Harry Truman on the presidential campaign trail, Allen wrestled with his own inner turmoil” (94). His withdrawal galvanized what he saw as a particular hollowness of life around him. He wrote in his journal of walking through Harlem among people who “all had incredible
sleepy, bestial expressions on their faces, yet [were] no different from what they usually looked like.”

At a distance from the busy world outside his Harlem door, Ginsberg became intensely drawn to William Blake’s mystic poetry. Bill Morgan notes that “Allen had been studying the poetry of William Blake more or less on his own ever since his advisors at Columbia told him that Blake was too far out of the mainstream to be worthy of serious scholarship” (103). By 1948 it seems Ginsberg was attracted by what he felt was their mutual distance from conventional society. Blake, though, was difficult to decipher. As Morgan puts it, Ginsberg, “had been attracted to the world Blake created in his poetry, but he couldn’t crack the complicated code to reveal Blake’s hidden secrets” (103). One July late afternoon, however, Ginsberg achieved a sudden clarity. It was common at that time for him to read while masturbating; this time the text was Blake’s lyric, “Ah! Sun Flower” diverting his erotic attention. “I wasn’t even reading,” he later recalled in an interview with the Paris Review. “I’d read the poem a lot of times before, overfamiliar to the point where it didn’t make any particular meaning except some sweet thing about flowers.” Just as he came, barely having, “wiped the come off my thighs, my trousers,” Ginsberg realized he was hearing the actual voice of William Blake reciting “Ah! Sun Flower” to him.

The moment stayed with Ginsberg for decades. As he put it later in the same interview, “simultaneously the auditory hallucination…the apparitional voice, in the room, woke me further deep in my understanding of the poem because the voice was so completely tender and beautifully… ancient… it was like
God had a human voice with all the infinite tenderness and anciency and mortal gravity of a living Creator speaking to his son.” Ginsberg never questioned the validity of his experience. In stark contrast to the uncertainty that shrouded his letter to Reich, Ginsberg immediately knew it was Blake’s voice, and realized the significance of such a voice.

William Blake’s “Ah! Sun Flower” is part of his 1794 Songs of Experience. The poem transforms how, over the course of the day, sunflowers follow the sun across the sky, into a trope for spiritual questing. Blake’s flowers are “Weary of time” as they “countest the steps of the Sun” (1-2). Hearing the poem in Blake’s voice, Ginsberg realized he was the sunflower, the “Youth,” who “pined away with desire,” and that Blake was urging him to “arise from,” his “grave and aspire” (5,7). The experience galvanized him. Estranged from the world, Ginsberg found solidarity in the “weary” sunflower, to whom Blake suggests another way of seeing, “Seeking after that sweet golden clime” (3).

In 1965 Ginsberg combined his experience with a new understanding of the poem “I suddenly realized that this existence was it!” he told an interviewer. “And, that I was born in order to experience up to this very moment that I was having this experience, to realize what this was all about – in other words that this was the moment that I was born for. This initiation. Or this vision or this consciousness.” The Blake vision compelled a sense of meaning and purpose, outside of Ginsberg’s own experience, to his life as a poet. It became a lens through which he came to see his personal struggles connected to “the doom of
the whole universe.” He was “convinced,” according to critic Paul Portugués, “that he had been chosen to experience an ultimate truth” (14).

Like his 18th century forbearer, Ginsberg had almost a visceral grasp of, as he noted in a journal entry from 1949, “the massive distances of cloudless and immobile atmosphere toward the unseen stars,” he “felt the gigantic weight of Time,” the immanence of every object to the permanent whole (Plimpton 266). Looking out onto the same city blocks on which he had seen empty faces leading mundane existences, Ginsberg, recognized the salience of his new vision. As Schumacher puts it:

His perception shifted to a near-hallucinatory state in which, like Blake, he was capable of seeing eternity in a grain of sand, or the timelessness of the graying sky outside, without feeling foolish or untruthful. In one shudder of illumination, Allen reached the understanding that poetry was eternal (95).

Ginsberg’s epiphany was also an initiation into the spiritual vision through which he would express the world in “Howl.” Ginsberg began to observe the world as he had not before, in which ordinary scenes were suddenly pregnant with spiritual significance. His investigation of this new apparitional vision was expressed at that time in a kind of immediate, notational musing and poetry that recalls Blake’s pithy verse. In his journal, Ginsberg noted that he would search for “glimmerings,” “hints,” and “secret amazements” and a poetic language through which to express them.
In his poem, “The Terms in Which I Think of Reality,” (Spring 1950), Ginsberg builds on his intuition that the vision that accompanied his Blake hallucination was actually an apparition of reality that had dissolved the veil of superficiality. He claims, “Reality is a question/ of realizing how real/ the world is already” (1-3). These lines point to Ginsberg’s internal transformation. In this new perspective, Ginsberg discovers a transcendent fixity in the world’s rapid material change. In “Metaphysics,” one of a series of short poems from the summer of 1949, Ginsberg demonstrates the unchanging nature of his apparitional vision and extends it to describe the world as fundamentally timeless. He claims, “This is the one and only/ firmament; therefore/ it is the absolute world...I am living in Eternity.” (1-3,6). These observations in particular were born out of Ginsberg’s seclusion and alienation. On June 29th, 1949, Ginsberg had been admitted to the New York State Psychiatric institute, where, in his journal, he found the doctors “thin, pale lipped, four-eyed, gawky, ungainly psychology majors with vapid, half embarrassed, polite smiles on their faces” (Morgan 116). At a stroke, he had been removed from the markers of conventional society. His heightened alienation recalls the Blake poems Ginsberg was reading at the time.

In “London” from 1794’s Songs of Experience, the same collection that contains “Ah! Sun Flower,” Blake paints London and its inhabitants in a similar light as the dejected Ginsberg in Harlem nearly two centuries later.

I wander thro’ each charter’d street,
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice; in every ban,
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear[..] (1-9)

Blake demonstrates an acute sensitivity to suffering, acknowledging each pain’s connection to a larger struggle, played out simultaneously in the world and its dictating forces. Ginsberg explicitly connects these lines to his 1948 vision experience in another 1949 journal entry. In his heightened sense of disillusionment from the world of “dead buildings in the barren air,” populated with “bodies of the soul that build the wonderland,” who “shuffled and stalked and lurched in attitudes of immemorial nightmare all around,” Ginsberg wrote that he “felt that I would be crucified if I alluded with any insistence to the divine nature of ourselves and the physical universe,” that he had come to realize through his hallucination. In light of this realization, Ginsberg pointed out in his journal that he was struck by these very lines in “London,” which expressed, as he put it in the April 1949 journal entry, the same “apparition of an evil, sick, unconscious wild city,” that “rose before” him (Plimpton 264-66).

Any discussion of Ginsberg’s altered consciousness would not be complete without discussing his intermittent drug use during this period.
Ginsberg himself directly connected altered consciousness, a central tenet of Blake’s mystic poetry, to “Howl” in a 1966 statement describing his experiences under the influence of LSD, mescaline, and peyote, among other drugs, as part of the Timothy Leary Papers now kept at the New York Public Library. In his account, Ginsberg noted that peyote revealed a “more detailed world than normal mind,” and pointed out that he wrote “a text which is now taught in many universities – [“Howl”] – largely, “while I was in state of consciousness altered, or enlarged...by Peyote.” Importantly, however, Ginsberg does not limit his “enlarged” consciousness to the effects of mind-altering drugs. In the same testimony, Ginsberg found similarities between his drug-induced experiences and “a crucial experience – what is called a visionary experience, or ‘aesthetic’ experiences – without drugs – that deepened my life,” referring to his Blake hallucination at age 22. For Ginsberg, both of these induced “a definite break in ordinary consciousness” that is central to the vision through which “Howl” is expressed.

It is this new way of seeing that elucidates Moloch as a force that permeates Ginsberg’s world in “Howl.” Moloch comes alive in the objects that ostracize Ginsberg: “Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment!” (21). All of these institutions articulate the sources of Ginsberg and his friend’s misery. They are not individual actors, but rather physical embodiments of Moloch’s “Solitude! Filth! Ugliness!” (21). Moloch’s portrayal borrows from
Blake’s description of Urizen, which Ginsberg mentions in interviews and journals as one of the texts he focused on during this period.

“The First Book of Urizen,” written in 1794, the same year as *Experience*, chronicles incipient doom at the hand of a dark force similar to Moloch. Notably, Urizen is, at once, palpable and intangible. Unseen but ubiquitous. Incomprehensible but obviously felt. Blake describes a force “of horror...risen/
In Eternity! Unknown, unprolific?... ‘It is Urizen,’ But unknown, abstracted/
Brooding secret, the dark power hid” (1-2). However, where Ginsberg connects Moloch to specific aspects of American modernity, (“jailhouses,” “Congress”), Blake insists on Urizen as “Dark revolving in silent activity; Unseen in tormenting passions; An activity unknown and horrible” (18-20). Nevertheless, in Chapter III of “Urizen,” Blake highlights the connection between Urizen’s fundamental evil and the horrors that plague the humanity. In the dark force’s “Rage, fury, intense indignation” is encapsulated “All the seven deadly sins of the soul," and from this force, “living creations appear’d/ In the flames of eternal fury” (89-95).

Ginsberg’s eternal understanding chiefly implicates Blake’s mystic poetry, which focused on timelessness and transcendence. In discovering the world anew through Blake’s spiritual framework, Ginsberg also began to define concepts of desire and fulfillment outside of physical terms. “Hymn” (September 1949), fulfills Ginsberg’s desire for a similar escape that “Ah! Sun Flower” promises. In “Hymn,” Ginsberg searches for joy beyond physical pleasure. Expressing the spiritual limits of his corporeal life, Ginsberg notes in “Hymn”
that, “No hyacinthine imagination can express this clock of meat bleakly pining for its sweet immaterial paradise” (1). By evoking the hyacinth – the flower named after a boy Apollo loved but accidentally killed, from whose blood grew the flower – Ginsberg recognizes that his search for sexual fulfillment cannot provide spiritual satisfaction. The physical or sexual imagination, born from Ginsberg’s tumultuous and unsatisfactory sexual relationships, he realized here, would not engage the potential for the “sweet immaterial paradise” that his spiritual hallucination galvanized him to find. Ginsberg, here, is likely borrowing from 1793’s Visions of the Daughters of Albion, in which Blake tells of “The moment of desire! the moment of desire! The virgin that pines for man; shall awaken her womb to enormous joys” (178-180). Both poets here dissolve the line between the present time and all time, seeing any given moment, or worldly desire inextricably linked to eternity and final spiritual fulfillment. Ginsberg also pointedly appropriates the word “pine,” pointing to Blake’s influence on his word choice. In “Hymn,” Ginsberg couples temporality with eternity, prophesizing a time when “whether from those foul regions of the soul the ancients named Maleboge or the Dark or the icicle-like crystal roads of cloudless sky called Icecube or Avenue where the angels late fourteen there convened hang on and raptly gaze on us singing down” (3). In these passages, Ginsberg employs dramatic language to posit a broader understanding of the world, one that finds significance beyond immediate experience. In this way, it implicates the whole vision that “Footnote to Howl” demonstrates, and elucidates the spiritual apparition of the world that his hallucination two years earlier
engendered. Indeed, in juxtaposing “Icecube or Avenue,” Ginsberg anticipates
the juxtaposition of the mundane and the spiritual that would eventually
characterize “Howl.”

Where Ginsberg leans on Blake to develop a framework that assesses
misery and longing in spiritual terms, he also looks at Blake’s Songs of Innocence
to express redemptive ecstasy. In “The Divine Image” from Songs of Innocence,
Blake notes that, “Where Mercy, Love & Pity Dwell/ There God is dwelling too,”
bringing Peace. While it was a selection from Experience called to Ginsberg
during his 1948 hallucination, he was certainly well acquainted with Innocence.
In the same Paris Review interview, Ginsberg points out his fascination with “the
Jerusalemic world of Blake,” which, “seems to be,” made up of, “Mercy-Pity-
Peace. Which has human form. Mercy has a human face.” In Blake’s reverence of
these virtues is a predilection to take innocence seriously. Blake expresses his
divine vision by elucidating the connection between simplicity and godliness. In
“The Lamb,” Blake explicates a child’s innocence as divine image:

He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name

Little Lamb God bless thee.

Little Lamb God bless thee. (13-20)
For Blake, naming this fundamental divine image directly implicates the bard, a persona with which Ginsberg highly associates. In “Hear the Voice,” Blake’s introduction to *Experience*, he proclaims, “Hear the voice of the Bard!/ Who Present, Past, & Future sees;/ Whose ears have heard, The Holy Word, That walk’d among the ancient trees” (1-5). Just as Blake employs the divine image of the lamb to redeem London’s drudgery, so does Ginsberg seek spiritual fulfillment in the midst of his Harlem depression by seeking the prophetic role that Blake constructs. Ginsberg noted of reading Blake that summer afternoon after his intense hallucination, “that my vision of the early afternoon had returned, and this time in such intensity that I stared stupefied with knowledge of the words written on the page, as if there had been a magical formulation of my own awakening comprehension of joy.” His perception of joy within the ostensibly doomed world is crucial to his prophetic mission, and, therefore, crucial to *Howl*. In the same journal entry, Ginsberg pointed out that he “realized once more that the last a most terrible veil had been torn from my eyes” (Plimpton 266). Ginsberg found another personal parallel in the refrain of “Little Girl Lost,” also from *Innocence*. In the poem, Lyca, the “little girl,” wanders through the wilderness, guided by her parents’ grief. In a 1966 interview, Ginsberg explained:

> It’s that hypnotic thing – and I suddenly realized that Lyca was me, or Lyca was the self: father, mother seeking Lyca, was God seeking. Father, the Creator: ‘‘If
her heart does ache/ Then let Lyca wake” – wake to what? *Wake* meaning wake
to the same awareness I was just talking about – of existence in the entire
universe. The total consciousness then, of the complete universe.

Blake informed Ginsberg’s worldview, compelling the young poet to connect his
individual experience to universal truths that implicated a personal, spiritual
search grounded in reflection and observation. The goal of experience and
introspection, for Ginsberg and Blake alike, is to realize the divine image that
connects personal struggle to universal strife, ecstasy and joy to ubiquitous
godliness, and exhibits the whole universe in the smallest worldly manifestation.
In this way, “Howl” is a poem of divine image – an explication of Ginsberg’s
radical vision as it elucidates the world’s unseen forces revealed to him in
immanent ecstasy. Ginsberg adopts Blake’s concept of divine innocence and joy
and repurposes it to find holiness in the bleak world he describes. “Howl’s”
prophetic voice is then a direct response to Ginsberg’s period of recluse and the
particular way he learned to see “eternity in a grain of sand, or the timelessness
of the graying sky outside, without feeling foolish or untruthful” (Schumacher).

Ginsberg recalls Blake throughout *Howl* itself. In “Howl” Part I, Ginsberg
plays witness to those who, conceivably like himself, “passed through
universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light
tragedy among the scholars of war” (9). Indeed, the un-numbered “gardens” and
“rosegardens,” aptly chosen for their connections to Blake’s rose, as well as “the
subway,” “the East River,” “Zen City New Jersey,” “Canada & Paterson” are all
conduits through which Ginsberg senses “eternity in a grain of sand, or the
timelessness of the graying sky outside.” Adopting Blake’s vision allows Ginsberg
to interpret the modern world in its terms. Through his Blakean spiritual lens,
Ginsberg struggles to reconcile the American means-ends constrictive society,
dictated in “Howl” by the “scholars of war,” with his alternative vision.

Ginsberg’s use of successions of specific places, people, and things implicates the
notion of universal immanence he acquired from Blake. When Ginsberg laments
for those “who balled in the morning in the evenings in rosegardens and the
gardens of public parks and cemeteries scattering their semen freely to
whomever may come” (13), he evokes the ubiquitous, apparitional vision that
was born from his hallucination. For Ginsberg, these scenes, usually dismissed
and hidden from America’s view, are elucidated as wells of spiritual significance.

Ginsberg’s most explicit engagement with Blake, however, comes in
“Sunflower Sutra,” one of the shorter poems included in Howl. The poem’s very
title is notable for its connection to “Ah! Sun Flower,” the poem Blake heard in
his 1948 hallucination. In “Sutra,” Ginsberg sits with Jack Kerouac, who tells him
to “Look at the Sunflower.” Ginsberg sees the flower as “a dead gray shadow
against the sky.” The shadow is, “big as man, sitting dry on top of a pile of ancient
sawdust” (4). Ginsberg connects the “ancient” character of the sawdust to the
“earthen grave voice in the room,” which he immediately recognized as Blake’s
during his spiritual awakening. As Blake existed in the disembodied voice in
Ginsberg’s Harlem flat, so too, in the poem, does his presence inhabit the
sunflower. In “Sutra,” Ginsberg, “rushed up enchanted,” as the vision (both
literally and spiritually) of the sunflower “on the banks of the tincan banana
dock...under the huge shade of a Southern Pacific locomotive” recalls in Ginsberg
“memories of Blake – my visions – Harlem” (5). Sitting on the docks of the
Southern Pacific locomotive, Ginsberg immediately recognizes the spiritual
significance of the sunflower.

As the poem goes on, Ginsberg meditates on the spiritual vision he gained
in his solitary hallucination: “Unholy battered old thing you were, my sunflower
O my soul, I loved you then!” (10). The sunflower, then, serves as a (poignantly
chosen) conduit through which Ginsberg accesses the spiritual hints he had
gleaned from Blake. As he did in his “Footnote” to “Howl,” Ginsberg realizes the
holiness of the moment: “we're not our skin of grime, we’re not our dread bleak
dust imageless locomotive, we’re all beautiful golden sunflowers inside” (22).
Ginsberg does not reject the existence of “rubber dollar bills, skin of machinery,
the guts and innards of the weeping coughing car” (13), just as he, in “Howl,”
names those “who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic
tobacco haze of Capitalism” (13). Just as “Footnote” finds holiness in abjection,
the end of “Sutra” transforms the barren landscape, making it habitable to the
sunflower and Ginsberg’s spiritual expression.

While “Sunflower Sutra’s” conclusion gestures at Blake’s influence on
Howl, it expresses even more pronounced parallels to Whitman’s intimate
expression of the sexualized male body. Parallels between Ginsberg and
Whitman are clear and well studied. James Breslin points out that in “Howl,”
“Ginsberg leans for support on Blake and Whitman, both of whom he perceives
as maternal, tender, and therefore non-threatening authorities” (6). Whitman
celebrated “The beauty of wood-boys and wood-men with their clear untrimm’d
faces,” who, in “Song of the Broad-Axe,” use tools that are “shapely, naked,” and
“produced from a little seed sown” (37). Similarly, in “Sutra,” Ginsberg proclaims
that, “we’re blessed by our own seed & golden hairy naked accomplishment
bodies growing into mad black formal sunflowers in the sunset” (22). Both
Ginsberg and Whitman focus the male body to combine holiness and ruggedness.
The “skeleton thick sunflower” is a spiritual form that redeems the “impotent
dirty old locomotive” through its “golden hairy naked accomplishment body.”
Whitman describes the ideal city, forged in the image of “strong shapes,
masculine trades, sights and sounds,” by men who engage in strong, masculine
action; they “Muscle and pluck forever!"

This understanding compels Whitman to dissolve the line between his
sexual conception of self and his view of the world. In this analysis, another
parallel arises between Ginsberg and Whitman. In “I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak
Growing,” Whitman observes the tree, “All alone stood it and the moss hung
down from the branches,” and notes how “its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made
me think of myself” (2-4). Whitman’s phallic recollection of the tree is also an
expression of sexuality and personhood. Similarly, in “Sunflower Sutra,”
Ginsberg reflects on a spiritually impotent “gray Sunflower poised against the
sunset,” whose “corolla of bleary spikes pushed down and broken like a battered crown” (8), represents the endurance of Blakean spirituality. Supported by Whitmanian phallicism, the sunflower is battered but still survives amidst the industrial landscape that recalls the devastation of Moloch.

Jon Rosenblatt suggests, though, that, “poem-as-body offers Whitman the possibility of purifying his own mortal body, which has failed to provide him with the guiltless sexual contact with others that he desires” (136). In this way, Ginsberg seeks spiritual redemption in the Sunflower, “Unholy battered old thing,” which he now sees in spiritually redemptive light. Here, personal poetics and visionary observation merge on the precipice of spiritual realization. They lay the foundation for finding all things holy, as Ginsberg finds the neglected and downtrodden in “Howl.” Ginsberg, then, relies on Whitman’s language to express his own sexualized world.

Whitman expresses the physical world in personal and sexual terms. In her essay “The Language of Sexuality: Walt Whitman and Galway Kinnell,” Nancy Lewis Tutuen notes how “Whitman’s verse exudes energy drawn from his understanding of the need to convey a sense of the bodily presence of the poet” (136). In Section 11 of Song of Myself, Whitman writes of a woman who longingly observes “Twenty-eight young men” as they “bathe by the shore”: “The beards of the young men glisten’d with wet, it ran from their long hair/ Little streams pass’d all over their bodies.” The intensity of her vision is immediately connected with “An unseen hand,” which, “also pass’d over their bodies/ It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs” (210-213). Whitman identifies with
both the woman and the bearded men. Indeed, the Whitmanian bearded man may have inundated Ginsberg’s thoughts when, in a June 17th, 1948 journal, just weeks before his momentous hallucination of Blake, Ginsberg recorded, “Dream of seeking refuge and sleep with another tall-middle sized (tough) unshaven character, naked in bed of hay or unstraightened blankets in large room (glass) or sun porch in an empty mansion” (Plimpton 252). These lines sound eerily Whitmanian, focusing on the comfort in male sexual form and using the descriptor “tough,” a favorite of Whitman’s. Ginsberg’s journal entry expresses the same intensity of sexual longing as Whitman’s passage. At the same time, however, while Ginsberg “dreams” of “seeking refuge,” in “A Song of Joys,” Whitman confidently urges, “Behold me well-clothed gayly or returning in the afternoon, my brood of tough boys accompanying me” (40). In expressing an image of male sexuality, these lines also highlight a fixation on beards expressed in the sexual language that Whitman gives Ginsberg.

In 1955, right before “Howl” was to be published, Ginsberg was at sea and was not yet satisfied with the manuscript that would eventually define his poetic career. Reflecting on its “disorganization” in his journal, Ginsberg couldn’t shake the thought of “the guarded look in Whitman’s eyes...certainly a case of self-imposed repression and consciousness...all because he had no outside hand or outer validation he was tied to the point of repression” (Ball 273). Ginsberg’s admiration implies that Whitman occupies a similar paternal position, a guiding voice, as Blake’s “earthen,” mystic prophetic one. Ginsberg finds solidarity in the
repression of homosexuality he and Whitman share, and aspires to the liberated sexual language Whitman employs.

Both Blake’s radical vision and Whitman’s sexualized language become the foundations of Howl’s unique prophetic voice. Ginsberg knew the psychological and emotional effects of isolation. He had lived them in a Harlem attic for the past few years, some of the most tumultuous of his young life. But, while studying a Mathew Brady or Alexander Gardner photograph of Whitman on this day in 1955, Ginsberg, “focused on how [Whitman] reconciled his inner self with the vagaries of the world, paralleling [Ginsberg’s] own search for guidance in prayer and dream” (Ball 171). This small epiphany implicates his defining spiritual experience. Even in 1955, Ginsberg was still sensitive to the hints offered by Blake and Whitman.

There is a peculiar quality to many of the Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner’s photographs of Walt Whitman – the ones that Ginsberg was likely studying those days at sea. The area of focus is not squarely on Whitman's eyes. Rather, the clearest part of Whitman’s face is between the bottom of his eyes and the bottom of his mouth, with the intricacies of his curly beard displayed clearest. In an Alexander Gardner portrait from 1863, Whitman’s shoulders face the camera and his head is turned slightly, focusing just right of the lens. Traveling down the image, his face comes more into focus, as his eyes, mouth, and beard are captured much sharper than the top of his head and forehead. His mouth is closed, almost wholly consumed by his lush beard, which connects to his hair and fills under his nose and around his cheeks. In fact, there is nearly
more beard than face. Whitman himself was particularly fond of the picture, calling it “the best picture of all time,” and reflecting, “How well I was then!” “not much belly, but grit, fibre, hold, solidity.” Notably too, Whitman describes the photo as having “Almost the old professor look,” suggesting that he saw himself the way Ginsberg would see him almost a century later.

The image has become one of the most popular photographs of a man who loved to be photographed. It is very likely that the picture was among those that Ginsberg studied in the mid 1950’s. Ginsberg notices this in his journal, concluding from the pictures that, “Even [Whitman’s] sweet bearded kisses disguise under Christian compassion a more pure animal tenderness...holy animal tenderness, mortal tenderness” (Ball 172). These observations suggest Whitman’s paternalistic influence as well as his outright sensuous physicality. It is likely that Ginsberg’s focus on the beard is not unprecedented, but consequent to the importance in which Whitman held the beard. In a 1955 draft of “America,” the poet proclaims, “I Allen Ginsberg Bard out of New Jersey take up the laurel tree cudgel from Whitman.” And in “A Supermarket in California,” Ginsberg’s poetic narrator evokes Whitman at the beginning of each stanza. These notes once again implicate the period in Ginsberg’s life between 1948 and 1952, in which he searches for the sexual language realized in Howl.

Ginsberg appropriates Whitman’s sexual language to express his visionary awakening born out of sexual loneliness. In turn, they both sustain a fundamentally queer vision of the world. Loneliness, guidance, and Whitman’s queer bearded image converge in “A Supermarket in California”. Wandering
alone through the supermarket, the ultimate heteronormative space with “Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes,” the “self-conscious” Ginsberg looks for Whitman’s queer self-celebration.

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.

I heard you ask questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel? (4-5)

Ginsberg’s Whitman here does not hide. He revels in the meat section, and asks questions, while Ginsberg himself cannot wander “in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans” without being “followed in my imagination by the store detective,” (6). Ginsberg pines for sexual validation within the heteronormative space and looks to Whitman, especially his beard, for that guidance: “Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?” (8). He wants to be in Whitman’s queer world that focuses on the “tough” male form as Brady’s photos do. Ginsberg is “seeking refuge,” as he did privately seven years earlier in his Harlem flat, from the constricting heteronormativity of his America in a vision of a paternal Whitman, “dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher.”

In “Howl,” male sexuality is vulgar, but honest, and in the years leading up to “Howl,” Ginsberg’s journals and poems reveal a complex power dynamic. In
the midst of personal strife between 1947 and 1952, sex and power underpin his burgeoning visionary voice.

In a letter to the westward travelling Neal Cassady in 1947, Ginsberg explicitly expressed the vulnerability upon which he would reflect, the debasement, which would become crucial to his spiritual vision. The bisexual Cassady, who arrived in New York in late 1946 with his sixteen-year-old wife Lu Anne, had entered into a relationship with Ginsberg that soon grew as emotional as it was sexual. As attached as Ginsberg grew to Cassady, it was clear that the latter was incapable of settling down with one partner. After a couple of months, Cassady moved back to Denver, and though the two had made a pact to meet up there, Ginsberg arrived in the city to a penniless and inhospitable Cassady. By July 30th, Ginsberg was tired and depressed by Cassady’s dismissal of him. He felt abandoned while Cassady continually chose the company of Lu Anne and Carolyn, who would be his next wife, over his own. He left dejected, and by September, he was back in Paterson, then New York when he heard from Cassady. He wrote to Ginsberg and noted that his relationship with Lu Anne had failed due to “constant march of obsessions,” and “continual lying.” Although he did not promise to return to Ginsberg, Cassady implored in the letter that Ginsberg remain a source of comfort in his life and states that Ginsberg “must know, that any letdown in your regard would upset me so much that, psychologically, I would be a complete vacuum.” While their sexual relationship in the early months of 1947 was brief, the fickle Cassady nonetheless urged Ginsberg, “please don’t fail me. I need you now more than ever, since I’ve noone
[sic] else to turn to,” despite having moved physically and emotionally away from Ginsberg. In his response, Ginsberg demonstrated his inability to wean himself off Cassady’s manipulative presence, and wrote to Cassady in November, “I am lonely, Neal, alone, and always I am frightened. I need someone to love me and kiss me and sleep with me: I am only a child and have the mind of a child” (Columbia). Cassady’s departure left a sexual dearth in Ginsberg’s psyche.

His poetry echoes this ambivalence in longing for the comfort and ease of a normative life while grappling with the spiritual castration, or the inability to apprehend Blake’s spiritual hints, that would engender. In “I Have Increased Power,” written in December of 1950, Ginsberg is fickle but not insecure. Immediately recognizing, “My/ dreamworld and realworld/ become more and more/ distinct and apart,” he gestures at the prospect of a “Renewal of nostalgia/ for lost flair of those days,” when he, “sought in X seven years/ ago...mastery or/ victimage played out/ naked in the bed” (3-11). Where Ginsberg once sought validation in being sexually dominated – by Lucien Carr, Neal Cassady, or Peter Orlovsky – he recognizes in “I Have Increased Power,” that the realization of those longings cannot be fruitful beyond some “nostalgia for lost flair.”

Ginsberg’s spiritual awakening that surrounded his vision of Blake in 1948 is born partially out of the sexual loneliness Ginsberg expresses in those letters a year earlier. Over time, inspired by Blake and buoyed by Whitman, Ginsberg’s language of dependency in his letter to Cassady would transform into the realization that “The tongue and cock and hand and asshole,” objects of his
initial sexual suffering, indeed, his suffering of unrequited, or badly requited desire, are, in fact “holy!”

Ginsberg’s focus on his personal suffering implicates the significance of society’s dregs in “Howl.” This fixation recalls Whitman’s description of the greatest city in “Song of the Broad-Axe.” Whitman’s illustration is particularly striking for its inclusion, even dependence, on the characters that Ginsberg both embraces and inhabits in “Howl.” For Whitman, the “great city” is not “the place of the tallest and costliest building or shops selling goods from the rest of the earth” (112), but rather, “Where the city stands with the brawniest breed of orators and bards,/ Where the city stands that is belov’d by these, and loves them in return and understands them” (116). Whitman is describing a city that revises Blake’s London and is the utopian space to “Howl’s” dystopian vision. Whitman’s city celebrates “Howl’s” protagonists, indeed the characters who trudge through all of Howl, and releases them from their misery. Sexual confidence, then, was not the only treasure Ginsberg found in Whitman. He also discovered a way to see in the social world of the 1950’s the possibility of a kind of holy utopia. This can be glimpsed in “Supermarket.” It also takes form in “Sutra,” which both sets the enduring flower in a dystopian setting and sees its endurance as promising a utopian one, like Whitman’s “great city” in “Broad-Axe.”

Both Whitman and Ginsberg convey their dissatisfaction with American convention and find a formal basis for expressing expansive joy – holiness for Ginsberg – through poetic form. Breslin notes that “In “Howl” itself, “Ginsberg
stepped outside of the formalism of the fifties, stepped away from even the
modernism of Williams, and turned back to the then-obscure poet of *Leaves of
Grass*, transforming Whitman’s bardic celebrations of the visionary yet tender
self into a prophetic chant” (2). This is clear in both poems’ syntax and structure.
“Howl’s” litany seems spontaneous. Each phrase’s repetitive beginning embodies
each poet’s respective prophetic voice, their structures thereby in accord. As
Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* observes:

> The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just open’d
> lips,
> The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her
> tipsy pimpled neck,
> The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer
> and wink to each other, (“Song of Myself” l. 305-307)

so does Ginsberg in “Howl” remember those,

> who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars racketing through snow toward
> lonesome farms in grandfather night,
> who studies Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bob kabbalah
> because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas. (12)

These passages demonstrate how form embodies voice, relying on the rhythm
and tactile sound of the “bonnet” that “bobs” and the “boxcars” that “racket”.
Both clearly place vocable emphasis on the phrases’ active verbs and poignant descriptors. The pronouns, prepositions, and articles retreat in emphasis to highlight the “men” who “jeer and wink” and the “cosmos” which “instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas.”

However, this comparison also clarifies how Ginsberg came to distinguish his own poetic voice. His observations are dynamic, mimicking the action that his vision assumes. Where Whitman builds a scene visually, almost as theater or tableau, Ginsberg transforms a potentially visual moment – lighting a cigarette in a boxcar at night – by inundating it with the repetitive sound of the tracks, (“boxcars boxcars boxcars”). Breslin notices this as well, noting that, “Both poets build a catalog out of long, end-stopped lines that are syntactically parallel. Yet Whitman’s lines, each recording a single observed image in a transparent style, are simple and move with easy insouciance, while Ginsberg, an embattled visionary, picks his lines with surrealistic images, and makes them move with an almost manic intensity” (7).

The consecutive and spontaneous random structure that both Whitman and Ginsberg employ “search[es]...for a language that would incarnate the self,” in which “Ginsberg took the notion of form as discovery he had learned from Williams and pushed it in confessional and visionary directions alien to the older poet” (2). Indeed, Breslin points out that “Ginsberg certainly did take over some specific technical features of Whitman’s work – the long line, the catalog, the syntactic parallelisms; he was in fact reading Leaves of Grass as he was working on ‘Howl’” (7). The elements of Whitman’s work that form “Howl” are elucidated
in Ginsberg’s drafts of the poem. He began writing “Howl” in the three-step line characteristic of William Carlos Williams’ late poetry. A draft of Part I sent to John Clellon Holmes from Jack Kerouac on August 30, 1955 is written wholly in this three-step form. Neither Ginsberg nor Barry Miles, who edited the collection of “Howl” manuscripts, could decipher the exact chronology of the drafts, but on another draft marked “SF 1955,” Ginsberg writes above Part I’s opening lines, “STROPHES.” The whole manuscript is, consequently, written in extended-line form, though the first line of each phrase is indented, unlike the final version that is written with hanging indentation. It is clear that Leaves of Grass’s hanging indentation influenced Ginsberg’s decisions on form in light of his conscious decision to write in strophes rather than short, Williamsesque lines. Ginsberg’s stylistic decisions imply that he found more power in the extended-line form than the more “notational” poetry that he wrote in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s. In light of short-line offerings like “I Have Increased Power,” and “The Terms in Which I Think of Reality,” Ginsberg’s extended form in “Howl” illustrates the formal transformation that accompanied his experiences during those crucial years between 1947 and 1952.

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Mention of William Carlos Williams prompts investigation into the imagist’s relation to Ginsberg. Williams would write the introduction to Howl, and Ginsberg included four poems written between 1952 and 1954 at the end of
“Howl,” all of which are written in Williams’ early imagist style. The influence of Williams’ mentorship, and the points at which Ginsberg departed from it in search of “Howl’s” language is demonstrably present in Ginsberg’s letters that were included in Williams’ Paterson. While Whitman and Blake are poetic muses – figuratively paternal figures whose poetry prompts Ginsberg’s own voice – Williams’ contact is more direct, and further relevant in light of Williams’ study and admiration of Walt Whitman. The first letter printed in Paterson is from March 30th, 1950, shortly after Ginsberg was released from the New York State Psychiatric Institute. In it, the 23 year old describes himself in similar terms as his 1947 letter to the psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich. Writing in spite of his “own self-shuttering doubts in these youthful rainy days,” Ginsberg, “inscribe[d] this missive somewhat in the style of those courteous sages of yore who recognized one another across the generations as brotherly children of the muses (whose names they well know) but also as fellow citizenly Chinamen of the same province, whose gastanks, junkyards, fens of the alley, millways, funeral parlors, river-visions – aye! The falls itself – are images white-woven in their very beards” (172). Ginsberg’s language is prescient to his spiritual forbearers, with whom he connects over barriers of time (from “yore”), and space (China). He also identifies with the neglected in “gastanks, junkyards, fens of the alley, millways, funeral parlors,” and frames them within a bearded image that is not sexual like Whitman’s, but paternal and wise, as Ginsberg held his old “courage teacher.” By 1950, then, Ginsberg is conscious of the literary lineage of which he wishes to be a part.
Ginsberg then begins to describe the poetic voice that will come to embody *Howl*.

All that I have done has a program, consciously or not, running from phase to phase, from the beginnings of an emotional breakdown, to momentary raindrops from the clouds become corporeal, to a renewal of human objectivity which I take to be ultimately identical with no ideas but in things (173).

His emphasis on expressing human phenomena through things, rather than ideas, speaks to his choice of Williams as a mentor. Further, in this passage, he points out the fleeting sense of vision in which he was rapt since his hallucination in the summer of 1948, connecting his writing “to momentary raindrops from the clouds become corporeal.” What follows in the letter, however, is a poignant indication of the voice he would assume in *Howl*.

I envision for myself some kind of new speech – in that it has to be clear statement of fact about misery (not misery itself), and the splendor if there is any out of the subjective wanderings through Paterson (173).

*Howl* is, indeed, a “statement of facts about misery,” in which “Footnote’s” redemptive spirituality finds “splendor”. In June of 1950, Ginsberg penned the second letter to be featured in *Paterson*. His short note anticipates *Howl* as he wrote about “discovering the bars” in Paterson and seeing “an incoherent bartender in a taproom overhanging the river, filled with gas, ready to explode,
the window facing the river painted over so that people can't see in.” His closing explodes with the potential that *Howl* will realize:

I keep wanting to write you a long letter about deep things I can show you, and will some day – the look of streets and people, events that happened here and there (193).

Bibliography


